The Right Stuff
Four principals from districts participating in the Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative talk about what it takes to be an effective leader.

By Susan McLester

Not everybody is cut out to be a school principal. In fact, a dearth in both the pool and quality of school leadership candidates during the past several years has been an issue of growing concern for education leadership organizations, like NAESP, and also philanthropic groups, such as the Wallace Foundation, that seek to close the achievement gap for disadvantaged children.

A decade of work and research producing such seminal reports as the 2004 How Leadership Influences Student Learning informed the Wallace Foundation’s decision to institute its Principal Pipeline Initiative with the goal of germinating and expanding leadership talent in high-needs districts.

The six urban districts participating in the five-year Wallace-supported grant program are already showing significant progress in implementing key leadership practices around vision, culture, management, improved instruction, and leadership cultivation—the five areas Wallace identifies as crucial.

Foundation publications such as Six Districts Begin the Principal Pipeline Initiative and Best Practices in Action show what exemplary leadership practices look like. Less often examined, however, are the personal and professional beliefs, ethics, and characteristics that allow leaders to drive such successful practices. What does it take? What is the right stuff?

As an exclusive for Principal magazine, I spoke with four successful principals participating in the Principal Pipeline Initiative for a peek “behind the curtain.” Five promising practices were revealed.

1. Be Inspirational

When novice principal Camille Wallin first arrived at P.S. 42 in the roughest part of New York City’s Bronx Borough 14 years ago, she found classrooms full of broken furniture, teachers working in isolation, and a complete lack of any school culture. Wallin’s first step was to invest in a comprehensive school clean-up, with new paint, desks, chairs, and bookcases and the elimination of clutter that had piled up over years. “You have to bat one out of the park right away if you want to rally stakeholder support,” Wallin says.
It worked.

That early win put students, teachers, and parents on notice that a new and effective principal was in charge and that improving the school environment was just the first step in setting the tone for higher standards in student and staff achievement.

A more complex obstacle to establishing a positive school culture was overcoming long-standing instructional practices and “baked-in” attitudes reflecting the low expectations associated with communities in poverty.

Wallin next took on the challenge of integrating into the general population the very large and segregated special education student population. “Special education staff were veteran teachers who had received a lot of awards for managing and controlling students well,” explains Wallin, “and many were resistant to mainstreaming their kids into classrooms where they thought teachers had poor management skills.”

Recognizing the value of every staff member, Wallin took the approach of helping each one reduce and overcome obstacles. The result was a co-teaching and co-mentoring model benefiting both general and special education teachers and opening up new possibilities for kids. “That change inspired the belief that we can do more,” Wallin says. Within three years, the school had exited school improvement status and was making adequate yearly progress for the first time in years.

At Nesbitt Elementary School in Tucker, Georgia, principal Clayborn Knight also faced the challenge of reversing a culture of low expectations. He found that listening to students, who wanted art, music, and drama, was the key. The tradeoff was that students who participated in the arts would have to keep their grades up to stay on the dance team or other performance clubs. The result? They did. Test scores increased by more than 10 percentage points that first year and some kids had an opportunity to perform with a local theater company, something they would never have experienced.

**Be Comfortable With Yourself**

American businessman John Peers once said, “You can’t lead a cavalry charge if you think you look funny on a horse.”

Understanding and being honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, and being comfortable with who you are, are the characteristics that stand you in good stead as a spouse, parent, and overall human being—and are no different than those that make you a good school leader, says Jonathan Grantham.

Principal of the newly formed K-8 Turner/Bartels School in Tampa, Florida, nine-year veteran administrator Grantham says knowing yourself allows you to make better leadership decisions, such as hiring for your weaknesses, which in his case meant recruiting a vice principal who was good with details to balance out his “big picture” style.

School leadership requires thick skin, says Grantham, so anticipating and dealing with criticism is just part of the job. “You have to be able to look in the mirror and repeat all the possible negatives about yourself because you will hear them from others.” The trick is not to take it personally, he says. “When parents seem on the attack, they really just have their children’s interests in mind and you have to be patient and understanding about that.”

Grantham also says being level-headed, consistent, constant, and transparent are qualities that reassure stakeholders, especially in stressful situations. His staff has told him they appreciate his clear, straightforward “yes” or “no” responses to many of their requests and suggestions.

Wallin agrees that being a confident decision-maker is key for a principal. “As a spokesperson for a shared vision, you have to be clear and firm that what you are saying reflects the shared beliefs and convictions of stakeholders,” he says, “even if sometimes you need to make decisions without hearing from every constituent.”

**Be a Trust-Builder**

It’s easy to talk about the impact of trusting relationships on effective leadership, but really working to build those personal bonds requires focus and a lot of effort, says Cheryl Franklin, principal of Robert Gray Elementary School in Capitol Heights, Maryland. “I think
of good leadership as customer service,” she explains. “When students, staff, and others enter the front door of our school, this is their home and that is where the service begins.”

Franklin, who describes her leadership style as “humanistic,” works with teachers to model lessons, analyze data, and grapple with curricular challenges such as implementing the Common Core State Standards. She also runs a parent academy, opening up computer lab doors evenings and weekends to train parents in the technologies their children are using. “When you work alongside people, you gain their trust and they will be more vulnerable around you,” she says. Since Franklin arrived eight years ago, the school has exited school improvement status and has received a Title I High-Progress Award three years running.

Every Friday, Knight schedules a Three Cs Café (Coffee and Conversation with Clayborn) to let teachers get to know and trust him in an informal setting. He also sees leadership development as an avenue into trust because it develops empathy in staff for big-picture issues. His yearly nine-session leadership academy uses simulated scenarios around such topics as budgets and staffing to help participants understand what principals face. Last year, 37 teachers and five administrators participated, resulting in five new grade-level chair promotions. As Knight transitions to the district’s new Graves Elementary School this fall, he takes along 35 loyal staff members.

4 Be Adaptable
Experts in principal professional development say the ability to be effective in a range of circumstances is perhaps the most difficult leadership skill of all.

When Wallin moved from P.S. 42 to Manhattan’s Muscota School five years ago, she found the community needed a radically different kind of school leader. Instead of struggling to engage parents, she found a parent population that was very vocal, involved, and fighting for their political agendas at PTA meetings.

Wallin harnesses this high level of community interest to educate parents and improve instruction through five-week training courses that prepare them to teach lessons in art and science. Parents are paired with substitute teachers, which frees up teachers to observe peer classroom practices.

Grantham, who has served as principal at five different schools, says adaptability requires listening and reading the community to learn what kind of leader they need. He “soaks up knowledge” from the people around him and tailors his actions and decisions to the situation. He uses the example of giving an interactive whiteboard to a teacher who had taken extensive training, but turning down another who hadn’t.

Franklin, Knight, Wallin, and Grantham all say school leaders need to be open about not knowing all the answers. “Exposing yourself as a learner requires transparency, and you have to be comfortable with the vulnerability that goes along with that transparency,” says Knight.

5 Be Courageous for Kids
“At the end of the day, it’s all about the kids, not the adults,” explains Grantham. “But standing up for kids requires courage.”

For instance, Grantham believes the best teachers should teach the neediest kids, which challenges many schools’ ingrained seniority practices. Instead of veteran teachers teaching all Advanced Placement classes, he thinks they should be taking on at least one course of English-language learners in intensive reading.

It also takes courage, he says, to stand up to parents who want to override their children’s wishes by transferring them to another school, or trying to live through them by forcing them to take activities or advanced classes they’re not ready for. “I’d get fired any day in the service of doing what’s best for kids,” Grantham proclaims. “I just won’t give in on it. All children need to be successful. No excuses.”

Nobody ever said the road to becoming an effective school leader is a smooth one, especially in the kinds of diverse and struggling communities in which these principals have cut their teeth.

They admit to being “terrified” facing their first faculty, having to own poor decisions, and hating conflict but needing to conduct the tough conversations. It’s not a job you can phone in or perform half-heartedly. And you have to work harder than anyone else. No, not everyone is cut out to be a school leader. But for those who do have the interest—and potential for the right stuff—there has never been a better time to start learning from the best.

Susan McLester is a freelance education writer in Berkeley, California.
This article is sponsored by the Wallace Foundation.
For more school leadership resources, visit www.wallacefoundation.org.